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**Title:** The becoming of form: contemporary approaches for an ontology of events after Heidegger

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**Keywords:** event; Heidegger; Serres

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# The becoming of form: contemporary approaches for an ontology of events after Heidegger

Nikolaus Schneider<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article offers insights on the investigation and development of an ontology of events in the wake of Martin Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*. It reads them with and against its later interlocutors concerning the establishment of a non-representational ontological realism. Dealing with recent scholarship, the article proposes to read the theoretical venture of a Leibnizian Structuralism made by Michel Serres in his 1968 dissertation *Le Systeme de Leibniz et ses modeles mathematiques*, and the surrounding texts from the *Hermes* pentalogy into the conceptual nexus of Heidegger's ontology of events. This approach circumvents the difficulty of distinguishing lines of causation from lines of grounding which otherwise fosters a theoretical inconsistency in more Spinozist-oriented accounts without thereby succumbing to the conflation of temporalization as presence and representation. It sutures 'formalism' and 'historicity' to yield a calculus of the history of virtual forms.

**Keywords:** event; Heidegger; Serres

## Introduction

No one can ever rid him/herself of one's 'philosophical imaginary'. All contentions aside, Heidegger's attempt to transform fundamental ontology into being-historical thought remains firmly mediated by traditional metaphysical attempts of theorizing the necessary. Whether and how Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* is to be of service for the foundation of a non-representational ontological realism today, after the attention devoted to the same issues in recent French philosophy, hinges, among other things, on the interpretation of its relation to the canon of modern European philosophy. This article aims to shed light on this relation by discussing two variants of 'evental modulation' in dialogue with

Heidegger's second major work.

I begin by problematizing the account of a coherent ontology of events in *Contributions to Philosophy* made by James Bahoh in his *Heidegger's Ontology of Events*. I will argue that its Spinozist-inspired conceptual apparatus is inconsistent with the requirements of an ontology of events, as concerns the latter's relation to time or temporalization. More specifically, this relates to the postulated difference between lines of causation and lines of ground operative in Bahoh's account. To draw on another traditional inspiration, the text makes recourse to Michel Serres' interpretation of Leibniz' *Monadology*. I will proceed by outlining the chief theoretical issues at stake in the 'Leibnizian Structuralism', proposing it as a solution to the detected problem of form or, in other words,

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individuation as it plays out vis-à-vis temporalization.

## The problem of ground and time

James Bahoh's recent study *Heidegger's Ontology of Events* offers surely one of the most cohesive and formative accounts of Heidegger's second major work to date. By reading Heidegger through Deleuze's ontology the work develops an 'evential' ontology of difference that yields a much-needed conceptual cohesion to an otherwise poorly theorized work. I will refrain from offering a summary of the book at this point and rather determine how and why I believe the set-out effort is, however, self-undermining.

The three proposed registers – ground, truth and time-space – each posit different processes of 'evential' self-coagulation.<sup>2</sup> While the general modalities these functions entertain with respect to one another – distortion and constitutive reference – are themselves derived from a process of individuation – difference – the respective forms of intelligibility they confer upon the event are not seamlessly derivable from it. This is played out in the semantically overdetermined aspects of these registers, that is, the functions that are not directly derivable from differentiating difference, which in turn undermine that operation if their distinction and their relation to differentiating difference is upheld. In other words, because of Bahoh's intention to distinguish between lines of grounding – logical path dependency from an antecedent to its consequents<sup>3</sup> – and lines of temporalization – causal relations – their actual mutual correlativity yields a theoretical inconsistency in his configuration of the event in *Contributions to Philosophy*.

To demonstrate this, I would like to argue that an implicit distinction between what could be called an operational and a 'methodological' register as a way of conceiving of the different positions the registers entertain with regard to the event is at play. In this way, in Bahoh's reconstruction of it, the register of truth is of a methodological kind because Heidegger's concept of truth, at this stage of the account, ensures quasi-methodologically that 'evential' processes reflect processes of 'materialization' or the constitution of the world, yielding Heidegger's kind of ontological and epistemological realism.<sup>4</sup> The *truth of being* is, in other words, its meta-ontological status as the condition of possibility of 'wordliness' (*Weltlichkeit*). In contrast to that, ground and time-space are implicitly operational registers because they drive the 'contentful' articulation of the event forward. They do so by means of offering the conceptual instantiations of temporalization/ spatialization as well as the general logic of grounding of which the event as theorized in *Heidegger's Ontology of Events* is the final instance. Hence, the register of truth is only 'formalistically' relevant, whereas ground and time-space are 'semantically' or 'operationally' so.

Although the operation of constitutive reference and its concomitant logic of grounding are derived from difference – as appropriation and expropriation – these processes are established in light of the temporal notions of equiprimordiality and simultaneity<sup>5</sup>, putting in danger the seamless distinction between them that is of chief importance for the text's theoretical venture. While it is purported that grounding remains autonomous with regard to the other registers – each addresses the event from a different perspective – it has to be maintained that the operations of distortion and constitutive

<sup>2</sup> Cf. James Bahoh, *Heidegger's Ontology of Events*, 167.

<sup>3</sup> See the section 'methodological principles' in Bahoh's account. Cf. *ibid.*, 29–35.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 140, 171–175.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 169ff.

reference stem in fact from the interplay and implied reciprocity of lines of causation and lines of ground.

Separating lines of causation from lines of temporalization may seem like a sensible move in the overall context of Heidegger's thoughts about the causal condition of representationalism but it remains tied to the pitfalls of the empiricio-transcendental doublet. As the recourse to temporal categories shows, lines of causation always imply or are, in the last instance, even identical to lines of temporalization and vice versa. The *petitio principii* of the origination of lines of temporalization from lines of grounding or vice versa – as either the deployment of the suspension of the principle of sufficient reason or as a hermeneutical circle – yields at least two principle strategies of dealing with this problematic: either an immanent cause or a logic of temporal withdrawal.<sup>6</sup>

While it is to be maintained that each of the different registers conceive of the event from a different perspective a theoretical inconsistency arises once this interplay is taken to its logical conclusion. This plays out especially harmful in relation to the register of ground, whose status is rather equivocal. Taking up the detected difference between a 'methodological' and a functional/ operational register one perceives an overall qualitative shift in the development of the structure that renders it incoherent. It seems that, insofar as ground is something that the event functionally depends

on as a mechanism of intelligibility in its threefoldness as abyssal ground, primordial ground and distortive ground it is one the one hand – Spinozistically speaking – an attribute and – being subject to infinite equiprimordial self-differentiation – on the other a mode.<sup>7</sup> It can, however, only be one or the other.<sup>8</sup> Rendering the event legible depends on the attribute but it is precisely by means of its participation in the ontologized interplay between the registers within what Bahoh terms the logic of determinateness as a differentiating mode that the cohesion of Heidegger's *Ontology Of Events* is abandoned. Without this qualitative shift, that is, from an operational to a methodological register, grounding and its mechanism, is however, no longer of functional relevance as one could not conceive of what it means that an operation that expresses lines of logical consequentiality is self-differentiating.

Thus, the position of the register of ground is reversed from a functional law to a component within the logics of worlds. Furthermore, no theoretical resource is provided that would account for this reversal. Relying on 'ontologization' via truth does not offer a compelling argumentative strategy as it is precisely the difference between functionalization and ontologization that is at stake here.<sup>9</sup> This concerns the extent to which contentful elements – means by which the event can theoretically be recovered, such as grounding or time-space – are conceived as derived of being or pertain

<sup>6</sup> The different inspirations and predecessors of these models are (certain ways of reading) Spinoza and Descartes. Examples such as the postulation of retroactive causality deployed in Žižek's and Gabriel's reading of Schelling on the one hand or of a logic of immanency along Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza on the other come to mind. The discussed account is distinctly split between these mutually exclusive alternatives as the structure of time-space is said to encompass aspects of temporal distension, while relying on a general logic of immanency. For a detailed overview of the way these alternatives were configured in recent French philosophy see chapter four in cf. Katja Diefenbach, *Spekulativer Materialismus. Spinoza in der postmarxistischen Philosophie*. See also the respective temporal manifestations of these models in cf. Vittorio Morfino, "Intersubjectivity or Transindividuality: The Leibniz-Spinoza Alternative," 132–156.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 161, 167, 169ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kerstin Andermann, *Die Macht der Affekte. Spinozas Theorie der Individuation*, 59ff.

<sup>9</sup> This is reminiscent of Ernst Cassirer's distinction between a substance-concept and a function-concept, who draws on Leibniz to found and elaborate upon this differentiation. Cf. Laura Herrera E. Castillo, "Einleitung," 6ff.

to its withdrawn or immanent core. One cannot postulate that ground and time-space are ‘products’ of the truth of beyng if that very same operation makes recourse to the former two. Thus, the objection concerns essentially the illegitimate diffusion of principal ways of constructing an ontology of events.<sup>10</sup>

Rather, there would need to be a recess where ground would only be a functional or a methodological register but not at different stages. This recess can, however, not be provided for if ground is equiprimordially self-differentiated. If one grants that lines of causation and of temporalization are *strictly* to be thought as reciprocally determined collapsing them circumvents the dissolution of what figures, on the one hand, as quasi-Spinozist mode – a particular element subject to infinite differentiation – and an attribute – a function, by which we confer intelligibility upon the event. What is thus needed to adequately theorize the event is a different model of individuation, or how forms develop under time. By negotiating the ‘evential’ problematic along the lines of its basic concepts such as identity, difference time, form, and relationality the differential constitution of fields of difference can be problematized with regard to the historical itinerary of 1960s structuralism and its modulization of certain figures from modern European philosophy, to which I will now turn.

## From mode to monad

To propose a productive alternative, I will turn to an author largely neglected in the mainstream debates on French structuralism and its problematic of the event: Michel Serres and, more specifically, his reading of Leibniz’ *Mon-*

*adology* as the former developed it in his 1968 dissertation *Le Systeme de Leibniz et ses modeles mathematiques* as well as the *Hermes* pentalogy. It is on the notion of expression that Serres’ reading of Leibniz offers a compelling theoretical alternative to circumvent the demonstrated problematic. I will offer a brief discussion of the main issues at stake in the reading before setting out a further trajectory to bring Serres and Heidegger on the event into conversation.

The basic question Serres addresses in his dissertation and the adjacent texts concerns the conditions of possibility under which one can legitimately import or map forms or structures of one domain onto another.<sup>11</sup> In order to do so, one needs to abstain from any notion of substance and/ or principle of individuation and rather conceive of structure as a bundle of functional relations instantiated by their application. “[S]tructure is the formal analogon of all the model it organizes.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Serres’ notion of structure is dissimilar to Saussure and the developments following the latter’s understanding of structure.<sup>13</sup> It similarly marks a rupture with the classical philosophical definition of structuralism as presented by Deleuze in his essay *How do we recognize Structuralism?* Whereas for the latter elements of a structure mutually imply one another by way of their differential repetition, it is for Serres “the repeatability of the aforementioned models through which structure gains concreteness”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, there is no primal viewpoint which works as the key to the system of Leibniz, and, in this sense, it functions as an epistemological pluralism that reads pluralism, perspectivism and universalism into one another.<sup>15</sup>

To do so, strongest emphasis is put on

<sup>10</sup> See footnote six for a further overview and Bahoh’s contradictory position with regard to it.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michel Serres, *Hermes I. Kommunikation*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Serres quoted in Lucie Mercier, “Michel Serres’ Leibnizian Structuralism,” 7; amendments mine; N.S.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lucie Mercier, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Lucie Mercier, *The Inside Passage*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Michel Serres, *Hermes I. Kommunikation*, 12.



preestablished harmony as the postulation of fundamental laws, whose intersections are constitutive of monadic unities. Monads function as multivalent<sup>16</sup> points of intersection through which they are the realization of a model by a set of laws.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, as Serres expresses this, these laws or ‘paths’ converge in a ‘point of contact’ – the star-shaped monad acting as a summit or well.<sup>18</sup> Perception and expression, the monads characteristics, each refer to different relations between monadic multiplicities, that is, for the former, the representation of a multiplicity as a unity and for, the latter, its determination as a one in a manifold or multiplicity – thereby leaving each multiplicity with its own principle of composition.<sup>19</sup> In this way the concept of expression in Leibniz encompasses “structural relationality, reciprocity, individuality, perspectivity, reflection and unfolding (explication).”<sup>20</sup> The point is of course to think these configurations as reciprocally determined. Each monad entertains an assigned perspective and position both with regard to the totality and to specific others, thus constituting the differential identity of each of them. Mercier captures this characteristic in its Leibnizian idiom: “The ‘external relations’ of ex-

pression, reflection and communication figure internally to perception and, hence, expression and perception function as the externalization of internality and vice versa.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Serres takes the core notion of expression to figure as a variety of isomorphism.<sup>22</sup>

It is the notion of translation that is relevant in the context of an ontology of events. While a multiplicity may be functionally differentiated from others – it entertains a different perspective – the laws set out in preestablished harmony retain their form throughout virtual space in a transversal manner.<sup>23</sup> In other words, translation, as the movement of these laws, is “the transport of form through different multiplicities.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, one obtains a relational and, in this sense, ‘functional’ ontology, which de-substantializes the positions of the elements of a posited series. “[T]ranslation at its purest would be a certain relation leading from a one to a multiple, a *pluralization of form itself*, where each translation belonging to this new plurality still reflects its ‘origin’ and carries its ‘law’ within itself.”<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, as for Leibniz each monad subsumes all of its past, present and future states<sup>26</sup> – its complete concept – its basic characteristics, perception and expression,

<sup>16</sup> It is by means of the ‘spatial’ character of this multivalence that Leibniz acts as a predecessor and inspiration of various virtual ‘topological’ ontologies in the late 20th century. See Serres’s remark regarding the ‘two-dimensional’ character of dialectics and the many points of entry Leibniz offers for him. Cf. *ibid.*, 10ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Serres, *Hermes II. Interferenz*, 187. See also the discussion between Alain Badiou and Michel Serres on the model-structure relationship. Cf. Giuseppe Bianco, Tzuchien Tho, ed., *Badiou and the Philosophers. Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*, 111–138.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Michel Serres, *Hermes I. Kommunikation*, 12f.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hans Poser, *Leibniz. Zur Einführung*, 121ff. “Serres locates the Leibnizian Monad at the convergence of two mirroring multiplicities: the discrete multiplicity of the universe, exterior and aggregative (§2), and the continuous multiplicity of perception, interior and intensive (§13).” Lucie Mercier, “Michel Serres’ Leibnizian Structuralism,” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Laura Herrera E. Castillo, “Einleitung”, 4; my translation.

<sup>21</sup> Lucie Mercier, *The Inside Passage*, 105

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Michel Serres, *Hermes II. Interferenz*, 223. This is not to neglect different interpretations of ‘expression’ in the *Monadology*. For a discussion of expression in terms of analogy, representation or similitude see cf. Laura Herrera E. Castillo, “Dimensionen des Leibniz’schen Expressionsbegriffs,” 135ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Michel Serres, “Transdisciplinarity as Relative Exteriority,” *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Lucie Mercier, *The Inside Passage*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 128; amendements mine; N.S.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hans Poser, *Leibniz*, 125.

are put to work to turn the *Monadology* into a calculus of the ‘history’ of virtual forms. As Mercier details, the corresponding notion of structure is “a reflexive, expressive internal relation of complementarity between closure and circulation”.<sup>27</sup> The laws set out via preestablished harmony are continuously employed to determine the identity of a monad and its others. Serres’ own application of this model was to be found in his engagement with the problematic of the ‘history of truth’<sup>28</sup>, where the temporal ideality of the monad is replaced with the assumed historicity of mathematics. I will briefly lay down how the presented approach can be of service in the context of a philosophy of the event.

As has been remarked, the relation between time and beyng occupies a central position not only in *Contributions to Philosophy* but to the problem of the event more generally. Indeed, how one configures the relation of the event to temporalization – as a void or, alternatively, immanence – is the central trait defining of an ontology of the event. Etienne Balibar, in a text on the notion of event in recent French philosophy writes that the “‘evential’ break with dialectical processuality – still always bound by such symmetries as Being and Nothingness, becoming and eternity, continuity and discontinuity, determination and indetermination, representation and the unrepresentable, and so on – only develops, in a sense, the possibilities inscribed in the metaphysics of time, including [...] the re-establishment of the other side of questions it had to repress or deny.”<sup>29</sup> Translation as Serres understands it offers the conceptual resources for further investigating and approaching the conceptual configurations of *Contributions to Philosophy*.

The extent to which causal relations are always to be conceived under temporal conditions is sublated within a formalism that nonetheless subsumes all the temporal states of its elements. This clearly avoids their strict separation as seen instantiated by Bahoh’s account but does not regress to an altogether representational paradigm. Because the monad subsumes all forms of temporality within itself, translation as the non-temporal transport of form avoids the distinction between lines of grounding and causation. The intersection of the laws set out by pre-established harmony can on its own account provide the defining traits of the event: distension, constitutive reference, temporalization and spatialization while omitting the separation of lines of ground from lines of temporalization which, as has been seen, fosters the awkward and self-contradictory double-bind of the former. If one grants that distortion and constitutive reference are posited with expression and perception – as perspectivism and relationality – along with the temporality of the monads one would in principle have posit a model for which an ontology of events figures as structure.

## Conclusion

It is precisely because the notion of expression figures prominently in Leibniz and (Deleuze’s interpretation of) Spinoza that these two models can approach one another. As demonstrated, the attempt to separate the registers of ground and time-space, which are to be thought of a reciprocally determined, renders the account of the event in *Heidegger’s Ontology of Events* incoherent. While their rift is put to work to account for the ‘withdrawal’ of the event,

<sup>27</sup> Lucie Mercier, *The Inside Passage*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Serres developed this approach further in his article on ‘mathematical anamnesis’, which sketches the historical and recursive unfolding of mathematical virtuality in dialogue with but also opposition to Cavailles and Lautmann. Cf. Etienne Balibar/ John Rajchman, “Histories of Truth,” 59ff. See also cf. Mercier, “Mathematical anamnesis,” 51–70.

<sup>29</sup> Etienne Balibar, “Philosophy and Contemporary Reality. Beyond the Event?” 317–331.

the latter can only be conceived of under the conditions of time-space, short-circuiting any attempt of their separation. With regard to the ‘logic of determinacy’, this attempted separation comes back to confuse the Spinozist categories implicitly at play in the account. Because ground is said to be different from time-space it figures as an attribute – a way to conceive of the relations of dependency between the event and its antecedents – and modes, that is, individuated forms under causal conditions. Thus, what at first hand is separated can only be recovered again if it negates its own conditions of intelligibility. In contrast, turning to Serres’ interpretation of Leibniz, presents a different model of individuation. By means of a monad’s complete concept no difference is established between causal relations and logical path dependency. Rather, ‘formalism’ and ‘historicity’ are sublated to figure as the expression of the combinatorial possibilities of laws constitutive of monads. Serres’ interpretation, in the context of an ontology of events, can thus be made use of to foreclose the postulation of an attribute-like way to recover the event exhaustively and rather conceive of it as merely the form present in any determination. If, however “among the most curious and insistent features in the history of misunderstandings of Leibniz’s philosophy is the attempt to see within it a form of Spinozism”<sup>30</sup> more research is in order to further determine the nature of these laws as set out by Heidegger. Following this proposal, future research will have to return to the texts surrounding *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, such as GA 65, GA 66, GA 69, GA 70, GA 71, the yet unpublished GA 72, and GA 73 of Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe* to offer a more detailed account of how the event as preestablished harmony is the meta-ontological form remaining *present* as condition of possibility of every possible world.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Vittorio Morfino, “Intersubjectivity or Transindividuality,” 132.



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